

The Politics of the Labour Movement: An Essay on Differential Aspirations

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Introduction

For historians of labour the term 'politics' tends to a usage over and beyond the activity of political leaders and cadre. It encapsulates the entire process of the formation and articulation of class interests. The very act of historicising the activity of the working class and the labour movement implies the consideration of collective identities, howsoever inchoate these might be. This is in marked contrast to the clouds of ideological dissimulation that accompany the representation of capitalist 'growth'. Thus, the interests of capital and capitalists require and generate reified and mystical categories such as Adam Smith's 'invisible hand of the market' or Hegel's 'universal permanent capital'.^[i] Movements for nationalist and proto-national identities require fabricated admixtures of fact and fiction, ancient history and modern myth. The interests of workers are more down-to-earth and immediate. The emergence of labour as an ideologised 'factor of production' in bourgeois economy was coterminous with the growth of democracy in the initially developing sectors of global capitalism. The latter process had to contend with and harness the aspirations of the labouring classes to the programme of capital - whether these were projects of imperial expansion in European countries, or of national independence in their colonies. But the attainment of hegemony over labour always carried a price. Political developments such as adult and women's suffrage, combination rights and social welfare; and structural changes involving the regulation of working conditions and technical processes all expressed the growing significance of labour in modern society. In this sense it is relevant to pose the question whether capitalist democracy is at all a stable form of political association, the very End of History (à la Fukuyama), or an inherently unstable form, given to authoritarian degeneration unless driven forward by the aspirations of labour. Stated differently, we might consider whether the labour movement is implicitly social-democratic in nature, not in this or that phase of accumulation, nor ideologically as a vehicle of nationalism or Leninism, but historically, as the constantly present and

unassimilable object of capitalist exploitation.

These generalisations need to be tested in the micrologic of historical events, wherein the activities of workers take place in the backdrop of a larger confluence of classes and interests. Such an examination can enable the discernment of the *differentia specifica* of the workers movement. This essay will address the above general theses, not via the entire gamut of class relations in colonial India as a whole, but through a case-study of the class behaviour of workers in Chota Nagpur in the early decades of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, we start by finding the politics of labour expressed not as the pure movement of a defined class, but as part of a social movement in a determinate situation. In the material set forth below, which concerns the labour movement in the 1920's and 30's, I will argue that workers were cognisant of nationalist politics, but in their own way, and with the tendency to invest nationalism with their own specific content. The colonial subjugation of India made sense in light of their experience of European supervisors; questions of democracy were translated into such issues as the right to choose their leaders (including the notorious 'outsider') irrespective of the preferences of the established unionists or factory owners; and the emergence of popular ministries became for them an occasion to launch mass struggles for long-standing demands. The observations set out here are grounded in research to which references will be provided. [ii]

The material upon which I shall base my generalisations is the history of the labour movement in Chota Nagpur in the 1920's and 1930's. This area is a demographically distinctive region, and the location of the heaviest concentration of metallurgical and mining enterprises in colonial India. The core zones were the belt around the Tata Iron and Steel Company in Jamshedpur (TISCO), and the Jharia coalfields in the Dhanbad subdivision of Manbhum. Several 'associated companies' were engaged in engineering and metallurgical work in Singhbhum, which was also the site of metallic-ore mines. These included the Tinsplate Company, the Tatanagar Foundry, the Indian Steel Wire Products Ltd, the Cable Company, and the Indian Copper Corporation at Ghatsila. Jharia and its environs contained the richest seams of superior-grade coal in India.

There were also coal and mica mines in neighbouring Hazaribagh. Some 1 to 1.25 lakh workers were employed in the production and despatch of coal, the most crucial energy commodity in the colonial economy, for which the chief customers were the Railways, the merchant Marine, metallurgical industries, and industries running on steam-driven engines, including various mills.

Steel production in TISCO reached 429,000 tons in 1928 and 800,000 tons in 1939.[iii] During 1914-1918 nearly all of its capacity was devoted to the British war effort in the Middle East. Its workforce was 30,135 in 1923-24 [iv], after which the management began to implement reductions. In the late 1920's the local government reported a workforce of 29,000. [v] Contractors' `coolies' varied in number from 4000 to 8000. Allied establishments such as the Tinsplate Company, the Cable Company, the Copper Corporation, the Indian Steel and Wire Products Company, and the EIR and the Bengal-Nagpur Railway (BNR) workshops employed a total of 14,352 blue collar workers in 1938. [vi] The population of Jamshedpur grew to 57,000 in 1921, and was 84,000 in 1931.[vii] In 1929, the pool of unemployed workers in Jamshedpur was estimated at 7000.

The Politics of Intervention

Our period begins in the aftermath of the First World War and leads through the Depression to the advent of (limited) suffrage-based politics and the first elected nationalist ministries. An examination of the labour movement during this phase illustrates the nature of nationalist intervention and the interaction of state, managements, unions and workers, in the declining years of colonial power. During the eventful decade of the thirties, the workers of Chota Nagpur - many of them first generation employees - underwent a painful learning process, in the course of which employers great and small, began reluctantly to concede a more democratic system of labour relations. Concessions were wrung from the capitalists in the course of bitter and often violent struggles, which took place in a context complicated by the politics of nationalism and retreating imperialism. Commenting on the authoritarian nature of the managerial regimes then prevailing, Professor Radhakamal Mukerjee, a member of the

Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee had this to say :

even the formation of the trade union... provokes intimidation and victimisation on a large scale from the management. Workers want to... secure the rights of collective bargaining. But the agents whom they elect or choose are dubbed 'outsiders'... and treated with indifference and scorn... It is the managements' deliberate policy of non-recognition of unions and persistent refusal to deal with (their) accredited representatives... that is one of the most frequent causes of strikes in India, and a labour union hardly ever gets recognition without the ordeal of a strike... [viii]

The struggles for democratic industrial relations and against intensification of labour were central to the history of the labour movement in Chota Nagpur, and had their own political expressions and consequences. In the context of a national movement committed to displacing the colonial bureaucracy, the insubordination of the working class at certain moments resonated with, and at others diverged from that of the Indian elite, who needed to maintain the principle of managerial authority even as they challenged the authority of the British; to stabilise their rule over labour even as they sought to replace the ruling class. [ix] If we consider the major periods of labour unrest ñ 1920 to 1922, 1927 to 1931, and 1937 to 1939, we can discern three recurrent concerns in their agitation, viz., the demand that the management respect their choice of leaders; that it refrain from the use of direct or indirect intimidation; and that working conditions be altered. Underlying all these was the rejection of colonial, capitalist and racial domination. Their understanding of these phenomena may have been partial. In addition, they had to contend with the often invisible forms of manipulation and connivance between leaders, officials and managements. However, a survey of their resistance shows that the workers as a class, from their most backward elements such as miners, *rezas* and contract workers, to the skilled metallurgical operatives, possessed democratic expectations which had been influenced by the political climate of the times, and to which they contributed by the very fact of their combination.

TISCO's chief goals in the 1920's - Indianisation, increased productivity and reductions, were linked to the intensification of labour. From as early as 1920, there is evidence that

the workers of the region linked class subjugation to questions of race discrimination and colonial rule. Throughout these years workers demanded improved working conditions, employment security and control over the work-process. The high-point of their movement was in 1928, and coincided with strikes in the Railways and the Bombay textile mills. The 1928 strike highlighted important issues of worker's initiatives, union formation, political interventions and the stance of government. Its reverberations continued till the mid-thirties. In TISCO's early years the rawness of the workforce, the war boom, and the rise in real wages had conduced to managerial despotism. The American T.W. Tutwiler, General Manager from 1916 to 1925, had tolerated "no nonsense about modern concepts of democracy within industry. To him, the right to hire and fire workers was a God-given right". [x] This 'right' was delegated to "abusive and corrupt" supervisors and foremen, who wielded "too much power in... appointment, promotion, and discharge". Most senior executives were Americans, and "the common criticism is that the American, from his upbringing and his negro problem is naturally unfitted for dealing with Asiatic races". The fact that many immediate superiors were *sahibs* or Parsis added a racial element to antagonisms at the shop-floor. [xi]

Workers growing impatience with working conditions lay at the root of the crisis of the 1920's. From 1923 to 1927, annual production per man rose from 117 to 218 tons, and the accident rate from 3.98 per hundred workers to 7.45.[xii] Management usually blamed workers for accidents, and provided minimal compensation, even after the passage of the Workmen's Compensation Act in 1923.[xiii] Up to 1924, the continuous process workers worked a 56-hour week (eight hours daily, seven days a week), with no weekly holiday, and could be made to do four hours overtime. They got a day off in a fortnight only after 1924. General shift workers worked nine hours daily, seven days a week, with a two-hour break. *Rezas* did night work till 1920, and started receiving maternity-ty benefits only in 1929. Daily rated workers had no paid leave till 1945. [xiv] Exposure to extreme heat and gas, sudden changes of temperature and noise levels, made workers prone to pneumonia, tuberculosis, cataract, cancer, hernia, rheumatism, migraine, and silicosis of the lungs. [xv] Poor living conditions must have made the lowest paid workers susceptible to these afflictions. This may have been linked to the high rates of accidents and turnover.

On 24 February 1920, there was a lightning strike led by TISCO's foundry workers. Emboldened by the nationalist upsurge and a railway strike in Kharagpur, the strikers approached Byomkesh Chakravarty and Surendranath Haldar of Calcutta, who helped found the Jamshedpur Labour Association (JLA). The agreement they brokered was repudiated by the workers, who demanded accident compensation, better treatment of subordinates, a service code and strike-pay. [xvi] Government officials were active mediators. On 13 March, workers attended pickets armed with sticks. Clashes and firing two days later resulted in 5 deaths and 23 injuries, amidst slogans such as *Death to the sahibs*. Racial bitterness was exacerbated by the fact that the firing had been ordered by Mr Sawday, TISCO's European Town Administrator, vested with magisterial authority. He was attacked by a man armed with an iron bar, and the crowd had continued to advance upon the police, despite the shooting.[xvii] On 20 March Sir Dorabji Tata conceded wage increases and leave, but refused strike pay, fixed pay-scales and recognition to the JLA.[xviii] The struggle continued over the following months, despite the flotation of the Tata Workers' Welfare Committee "fostered by the Company", to compete with the JLA - a tactic repeated often over the next decade.[xix] However, in his appraisal, the Managing Director reported no evidence of any Bolshevik or Extremist agents... the European staff cannot get the men under them to work and Indians also cannot get the Indians under them to work... There is evidence of a new spirit of independence among the men. [xx]

It was this spirit of independence among the men that determined the new political styles of interaction between the labour movement and the nationalists over the following years. By the end of 1920, white-collar workers such as the Time Office staff were petitioning the Association for grievances related to inadequate wages and high-handed treatment; and the JLA was protesting the "gratuitous insult" to its President, S.N. Haldar, in being disallowed entry into the Works. It also submitted a petition to a British Labour MP in December that year. [xxi] JLA leaders were active in the non-cooperation movement, and the union gained a standing.[xxii] Further unrest took place in 1922. The Tatas now came under pressure by nationalist leaders to recognise the union, and TISCO's need for Swarajist support on the tariff question made conciliation

possible. In 1924, Motilal Nehru and C.R. Das agreed to support their case on condition that the JLA be recognised. In a meeting attended by Nehru, C.F. Andrews, N.M. Joshi, and Das, R.D. Tata was stubborn in his rejection of 'outsiders'. Andrews pointed out that an employee could become an 'outsider' overnight, (as was the case with Gurudutt Sethi, a supervisor who had been dismissed after the lightning strike of 1922). Reacting to Tata's language, the leaders told him that they were all 'outsiders' and 'agitators'.

[xxiii] TISCO continued to withhold recognition for some months on account of Sethi's presence as Secretary, even though the General Manager hardly saw the irony of his own request that Andrews be the JLA President. Pointing out that the GOI had accepted the necessity of outsiders in leadership positions in trades-unions and had incorporated this in a new Trade Union Bill, Andrews threatened to resign with a public statement of his reasons for doing so. TISCO, he said, was bound to accept the JLA with Sethi on its rolls or as an outsider. [xxiv] In 1924, the JLA made a point of this in its first political statement: "we... refuse to forego our elementary right of electing any one as our office-bearer and secondly the election of outside office-bearers is absolutely necessary to prevent the office-bearers of the Association being intimidated by threats of dismissal". [xxv] This was only one example of the growing democratic awareness of the labour movement.

Aspects of the Politics of Labour

It would be useful at this point to reflect upon the diverse determinants and forms of workers interests. They involved a learning process for different agents and actors (officials, nationalist leaders as well as ordinary workers), and were related to highly complex issues including race, class, national pride, sexual harassment and regional or ethnic identity. The heavily over-determined nature of unfolding events ensured that the labour movement ran a tortuous political course, and the urgent need to transform working conditions underlay all its expressions. Thematically considered, these expressions may be summarised as follows:

- a) The politics of representation and the question of agency
- b) The politics of identity ñ national, gender-based and ethnic
- c) Resistance to intimidation

The first incorporated all matters related to leadership, outsiders and electoral procedures within unions. They included the perceived right of workers to be considered as partners in the production process, and not mere servants of the management. These issues were of paramount importance during the 1928 TISCO strike, which marked a crisis of legitimacy for the JLA. The history of this strike (and indeed, that of the entire period under review) reveals that the issues of leadership and awareness of class interests was never a simple one of outsiders instilling the proper consciousness as in Leninist typology. The second theme concerns the process by which workers negotiated links between traditional co-ordinates of identity and gender on the one hand, and questions of class and nation on the other. Here we find that the presumption of the gradual dissolution of conventional identities and their replacement by an abstract working class identity, is unsustainable. Seeing no disjunction between the two, workers would often use regional and ethnic identities to build class identity ñ this is what happened in the 1928-31 period. They were also acutely conscious of their status as Indian workers within a colonial state whose population was undergoing a mass campaign for Independence. Liberation from imperialism meant democracy, the freedom to organise and struggle for better working conditions.

It could also transpire that if female workers (*rezas*) or Adivasis felt harassed as women or as tribals, they could transgress the norms of class unity and union loyalty to assert themselves ñ as evident in the Tatanagar Foundry strike of 1939. Finally, the workers desire to resist intimidation runs right through our period ñ it ought to be noted that workers might resent the intimidation of socialist politicians and union leaders just as much as that of the managements. Illustrations of these expressions are presented below, though not necessarily in discrete compartments.

Leadership and class agency in Tatanagar

The question of workers right to choose their representatives took a strange turn in the upheaval of 1928. The JLA leadership, having failed to articulate the worker's grievances, did its best to keep the pleader Maneck Homi from being elected the new president on the ground that only enrolled and paid-up members were eligible for the post. This assertion was radically at odds with their constitution. A machination

between the acceptable outsider, C. F. Andrews and the General Manager prevented the democratic renewal of the union, and laid the ground for much bitterness thereafter. The five-month long strike-cum-lockout which ensued during May-September 1928 ended in a contrived settlement achieved through the mediation of Subhas Bose, the new outsider acceptable to TISCO. [xxvi] There now took place eruptions of post-strike unrest on the shop floor. In an appeal to the administration to deal with Maneck Homi, whom management viewed as the instigator of these outbreaks, Managing Director Peterson referred to Bose as the men's "accredited leader", asked for Homi's meetings to be prevented by executive order, and stated that he (Homi) was not a workman and he is not out to assist labour but to create trouble".[xxvii] Bose was not a workman either, but was considered 'accredited' despite the workers perception that the JLA had prevented them from making a democratic choice during their strike.

Two points need to be stressed in our reading of this strike. On the one hand the workforce had shown their dogged determination to represent their grievances and to do so through a legitimate agent, one duly recognised by the management. Their concern with legitimacy was reflected in the speeches of certain activists, and their desire to mend, not end the established union. There is another significant matter ñ the question of autonomous agency. The managers animosity to the outsider was the mirror image of the politician viewpoint, which assigned primary subject-hood to an external factor. The problem for the labour historian arises upon the discovery that workers were actually approaching outsiders to lead them. In this scenario, subjecthood and agency flows back to the so-called helpless and ignorant working class. There is ample evidence to suggest that this was the case. Thus, the developments that led to the TISCO strike of 1928 began in February that year. Disgusted with the JLA's incapacity to deal with their grievances, the crane drivers went on a lightning strike and formed a strike committee. One of its tasks was to search for suitable alternative leaders. They rented an office and collected funds, demonstrating their capacity for organization. The following month, the 'coolies' of the Rail Finishing Mill (mainly Adivasis, Chhatisgarhians, and Oriyas), struck in protest against manhandling and abuse by foremen, work intensification, and racial wage differentials, and organised meetings to drum up support among different sections of the workforce. A police report stated that:

The Santhals are most obstinate people and... may take recourse to violence at any moment, unless they are properly controlled. Most of the strikers are not members of the Labour Association, and moreover do not like to be guided by them. Hari Prasad Singh explained to me that he came to study labour problems and was simply astonished to find the coolies talking sense (sic) and fully conscious of their rights. [xxviii]

It is interesting to see that even the supervisory staff was astonished to discover that coolies could talk sense. Be that as it may, the coolies and crane drivers soon undertook to find a leader. It was at their invitation that Maneck Homi appeared in their midst. [xxix] Notwithstanding these facts, the local sub-divisional officer attributed the unrest "entirely to political and communist agitation". Nor did the issue hinge upon the relative 'backwardness' of the workers concerned. As the strike spread to other departments, the General Manager complained:

"Even the sweepers say they should share in the Company's profits... the men... are talking of having their own committees which must be consulted in giving increments, promotions... and before discharging anyone... in other words, pucca Bolshevism... (They) must again be put back in their proper place." [xxx]

The TISCO strike of 1928 showed the capacity of workers to organise themselves and to solidarise with each end of the class spectrum, from sweepers to white workers. Strikers' meetings protested against wage differentials and the abusive conduct of European staff, derided as incapable of working for two hours in the heat. Responding to the JLA's concern with the (in)sanitary situation caused by the sweepers' strike, a worker raised a laugh at one meeting "by suggesting that the *sahibs* who were shoveling coal at the Boilers should shovel nightsoil instead". [xxxi] One meeting was addressed by representatives of different departments, including the sweeper Birbal Ghasi. The strikers addressed a leaflet to their *Hindustani Mazdur Bhaiyo* bitterly criticising the *burra sahibs* for the value they put on their own labour. [xxxii] The Sheet Mill and Boiler House Committees which functioned as the nuclei of the struggle issued a leaflet

entitled *Fraternal Appeal from Indian Labour to Their European and American Colleagues*, asking them not to perform extraordinary duties and reminding them of the traditions of workers' solidarity in their own countries. They also maintained groups of volunteers with red and green badges to conduct mass meetings. [xxxiii]

Ethnic identities were not denied, rather support was built through traditional networks. Thus, food was distributed from the Bistupur mosque. [xxxiv] The Golkhaili Jhopra mosque, frequented by the 'Cuttack Muhammadans' in the Gas and Boiler departments, was the place where activists, management representatives and JLA leaders would go to reason with the workers. On one occasion the Pathan worker Jhingan apologised publicly for having worked during the preliminary *hartal*. He asked Pathans and Punjabis to join the strike. The skilled operatives N.N. Biswas and K.N. Sen criticised fellow-Bengalis for strike-breaking. Communal amity was a major theme. The activist Bhabani Prasad warned that the 'Company's CID' might try to whip up tension. He asked Hindus not to object to cow-sacrifice, and for volunteers to maintain peace. Abdul Kader thanked Prasad and anticipated a peaceful *Id*... [xxxv] Homi praised Gandhi's fast for harmony and asked workers to pray for the unity of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in Jamshedpur. [xxxvi] the 1928 strike ended in a setback, but it began a historic process of democratisation of union practices.

Another event important from the viewpoint of understanding the phenomenon of intervention was the strike in the Tinsplate Company of Golmuri, a suburb of Jamshedpur, in 1929. This was a lightning strike initiated by plant level activists, but was soon thereafter taken over by a political leadership via the connections of the JLA. Tinsplate was under the two-third ownership of Burmah Oil Company (one-third being held by TISCO), a fact that motivated Congress unionists and left-wingers to launch what was to become an industrial *satyagraha*... There were good reasons for the outbreak, including racialism at the supervisory level, but its prolongation (over most of 1929) was ill-advised. [xxxvii] Nonetheless, Subhas Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, V.V. Giri, Prabhavati Das Gupta, Abdul Bari, Baba Gurdit Singh, R.R. Bakhale were all involved at various stages in a fruitless effort to find a face-saving exit for themselves.

What is noteworthy is that at certain moments in the long-drawn out strike the workers were certainly affected by patriotic sentiment and susceptible to nationalist exhortations. The faith they reposed in the nationalist leaders proved fruitless, but this does not detract from the import of their political decision to align themselves in the anti-colonial struggle. However, in contrast to the TISCO strike of the previous year, wherein worker activists had broken with the established union when it failed to submit itself to democratic pressures, the Golmuri movement exemplified a more passive stance by the workers. In 1928 TISCO workers resisted intervention, and accepted it only as a way out of an impasse. In 1929, the Tinsplate workers succumbed to intervention from the outset. It is significant however, that *in both cases the initiatives to strike came from shop-floor activists*. In truth, given the disastrous outcome of the Tinsplate strike, it is noteworthy that the workers of Jamshedpur did not evince a strong antipathy to Congress interventions. Reverberations of this movement occurred a decade later in 1938, when one of their leaders, Abdul Bari, a protégé of Rajendra Prasad, rose to prominence as the chief Congress labour organiser in the region.

1930 was the year of Purna Swaraj. The workers of Chota Nagpur continued to demonstrate their political sentiment. In this case the Sikh followers of Homi's Jamshedpur Labour Federation prevailed upon him to drop his anti-Congress stance on the occasion of the first declaration of Independence Day, much to the consternation of the ICS officials.[xxxviii] In 1930 and 1931, metallurgical and mine workers were sympathetic to the civil disobedience campaign. A portrait of the King Emperor was booed in a cinema house in Jamshedpur in January 1930, and the GM noted the marked increase in the use of Gandhi caps by workmen. How may we interpret workers awareness of the ongoing anti-colonial struggle? It was the evolution of a mass movement speaking the language of adult suffrage and electoral processes, that provided the context within which workers were influenced by nationalism. Their class activity incorporated notions related to the legitimacy of unions, the adequate representation of grievance, the dignity of labour (combined with a desire for racial equality) and the empowerment of Indians. Thus, the JLA's emergence was heralded by lightning strikes during the first non-co-operation movement in the early 1920's; there

was intense union activity during 1928-31; and again during 1936-39. These events suggest that it was through the emergent democratic nationalist culture that the labour movement was articulated. I give below an example of its compelling discourse.

Nationalism and the Politics of Representation

The nationalist project was a challenge to the hegemony of the colonial power. That is why it claimed to represent both intellectual and ethical elements of national existence. Such a challenge, to become feasible, would have to concern itself with substantial issues in the daily lives of the common people. The social-democratic content to nationalism was engendered in great part by workers' aspirations and their capacity to fight for their demands through the democratic spaces gradually being conceded by the colonial state. This was evident in the explosion of popular energies when the Congress ministries first came to power. Their advent in 1937 had a strong impact upon the working class - in this case the historical record is fairly rich. There was a distinct expectation that with Indians now in control of the provincial governments' workers would be able to secure long-standing demands concerning their choice of leaders, against intensified work processes, for improved working conditions, better remuneration and protection against whimsical dismissals. The newly elected Congress ministry in Bihar showed an awareness of these sentiments by appointing the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee (BLEC) in March 1938, under the chairmanship of Rajendra Prasad. Abdul Bari, Deputy Speaker of the Assembly, was one of its members. Workers at first saw it as an earnest of nationalist commitment to resolve their problems, and as a signal that they could now agitate without fear of repression. [xxxix] There was a wave of unrest, with lightning strikes often called to resist specific instances of perceived injustice. Some workers, especially the miners, would take recourse to strike action without formulating any demands. [xl] What took place in the year 1938 was nothing short of an upsurge.

The remarkable feature of this movement was the unionization of marginal segments of the working class, coupled with a tendency especially among miners, to undertake strike action without the formulation of demands, and then call upon an 'outsider' to lead them - in the case of the Jharia coal belt, it was invariably Abdul Bari. Without doubt,

workers experienced the emplacement of Congress ministries as a sign that their countrymen were in power for the first time, and this became an occasion to release pent-up frustrations. Verbatim accounts of the vibrant speeches of Abdul Bari in 1938 reveal a great deal about the assumptions of nationalist politics, its relationship with the poorer segments of the population, and the working class in particular. Slogans such as *Lal Jhande ki jai*, *Mazdur Dal ki jai*, *Mahatma Gandhi ki jai*, *Bari Sahib ki jai*, *Bharat Janani ki jai*, and *Inquilab zindabad* were frequently raised. Speaking to miners in Jharia in late 1938, Bari exhorted them to adopt the dignity of patriots :

"Hum jante hain ki apko bahut taklif hai..jab tak hum zinda rahen hum koele ki khad ki jitna mazdur hain unko zinda ker ke chhodengen... Zinda ka mutlab yeh hai ke azadi se jaise ke hum chalte hain aisahi hamare mazdur log chalen..."

He spoke of the need to infuse the workers movement with the spirit of service and courage:

"aap logon men bhakti nahi hai... Hum tumhari taklif ko jante hain, tumhare uper jo zulm hai ham jante hain, tumko kum mazduri milti hai ham jante hain, tumko kharab makan rehane ko hai wo bhi ham jante hain, tumko pine ka pani nahin milta hai wo bhi ham jante hain, tumko thokaraya karte hain yeh bhi ham jante hain, zarasi bat per dismiss hona yeh bhi ham jante hain. ...agar ham angrezon ka mukabala ker sakte hain to duniya ke tamam takaton ka mukabala ker sakte hain... duniyamen to tamam zalim mite hain.."

He could apologise for elements within the Congress who were opposed to workers' interests:

"Ham congress govt. se janana chahte hain ki indiscriminate lathi charge ki kia wajah hai. Ham Babu Rajendra Prasad se... puchenge... congress mein wahi party age chalne wali hai jo zalimon se mazduron ko bachane wali hai... agar ham is govt. ke zamane mein bhi lathi khaen, jail jaen, to hame fakr hai. Aj aise aise officer unke pas hain jo indiscriminate lathi charge karte hain, ya to Governor bahut mazbut hai ya yeh

government bahut mazbut hai... "

Bari asked miners to wait for the BLEC's report, but warned that they might have to launch a bitter struggle:

"Enquiry Committee hamare hak dilayegi to ham khushi se khud kam per jayenge. Congress ki wajah se hame bahut si chizen mil jawegi, lekin Enquiry Committee agar na kare to aisi halat mein ham sochenge ke ham... lard ker apna hak len..."

What do these utterances by the foremost nationalist organiser of the labour movement in this dense region of heavy industry signify? The Indian nation did indeed hold a meaning, and a promise for the most ordinary of Indians, those who dug for coal and worked at the furnaces. In varying degrees, they too, were patriots, who wanted to see the end of British rule over their country. They welcomed the attainment of ministerial authority by the Congress in 1937, and the following year launched what was perhaps the greatest ever nation-wide offensive by Indian workers. This offensive was proof of their belief that with Indians in power, they had little to fear from the state machinery. But their aspirations were different from those of the privileged classes and castes who commanded national policy. The gulf was however, bridgeable during moments of mass mobilisation. Individuals like Abdul Bari personified the common ground. But the tension between the political radicalism of nationalist leaders and the social aspirations of their mass following, was painfully apparent even to staunch congressmen.

Gender and Identity

The discussion thus far might lead the reader to believe that workers were always inclined to develop movements along the lines of straightforward class unity. We should bear in mind, however, that Chota Nagpur's emergence as the cauldron of mining and heavy industry had been accompanied by an overly subordinate status for its native population insofar as employment was concerned. The tribals of south Bihar were akin to the Irish navies of nineteenth century Britain. In the coalfields, *Adivasis* accounted for nearly 49% of the 'actual workers' taken as a whole and together with the 'Depressed Classes' (or so-called 'untouchables') accounted for 87% of those who cut

coal. Till the 1921 census, a fifth of the coal hewers were women, as were nearly half of the coolies, loading and carrying coal above and below ground. [xli] They formed 38% of *Adivasi* workers and 55% of *Adivasi* coolies. Nearly 90% of the coolies were 'low-caste'. The overall picture was one of a 'coolie' proletariat amongst whom women were present in large numbers. [xlii] The lives of the *rezas* in the mines and on the fringes of factory production were encapsulated within several layers of subalternity. To begin with, they were colonial subjects. As workers they were subject to the general disabilities suffered by the workforce of the region as a whole. As women they were relegated to jobs such as loading, slag-picking and cleaning boilers and were paid less than their male counterparts for doing similar work. And they invariably belonged to the socially stigmatised tribal and low-caste groups, a status which made them easy targets for sexual abuse emanating from up-country male immigrants to the industrial region. [xliii]

Certain events in the 1930's demonstrate the overlapping trajectories of gender, identity and class solidarity. Thus, in September 1934 the activities of two radical activists, the dismissed hands Mangal Singh and Phani Bhushan Dutta, who had been influenced by Homi's leadership, were extenuated from Jamshedpur for "setting up communist cells" and "particularly tampering with aboriginal labour". [xliv] A protest by women workers in late 1934 is also significant for the pre-history of the Foundry strike. In a memorial to the provincial authorities about the abusive conduct of *goondas* and *dalals* (hooligans and company spies) at the workplace, an activist named P.P. Patnaik wrote:

"They (*rezas*) complain that since they all resigned their membership in the Worker's Insurance Society... their immediate superiors... have always been deriding, chiding, and violently scolding them with very obscene language viz. *sali*, *randi*, and *bhoshri** etc. throughout the whole time they work and for this they have been exceedingly disappointed and depressed in their minds...[xlv] "

The overbearing behaviour of superiors at the workplace was a standing complaint of workers in Chota Nagpur throughout the twenties and thirties, and repeatedly appeared as a motivating factor for protest actions. For the female component of the workforce,

however supervisory abuse was only the tip of the iceberg. Many of the offending foremen were Punjabis, and judging by what we know about the composition of the workforce, most of the *rezas* must have been *Adivasis* and low-caste women. The abusive admonitions of the supervisors in this case were especially contemptuous and hurtful. It was Patnaik who drafted the memorial, but he must have been prevailed upon to do so by the offended women, whose feelings he described as disappointment and depression.

Late in the 1930's the mood of Chota Nagpur's workers was drastically affected by the quasi-democratic space provided under the extended suffrage of the Government of India Act of 1935. The advent of democratic politics also deepened the awareness of ethnic and regional identities within the labour movement. For example territorial disputes over Singhbhum and Manbhum had plagued relations between Bihari, Oriya and Bengali Congressmen for over a decade. [xlvi] The politics of an ethnic identity for the districts of southern Bihar dated from the beginning of the century. The latest of a series of tribal rebellions had been led by Birsa Munda at the turn of the century, leaving reverberations in *Adivasi* consciousness during the national movement, with popular folk songs linking Gandhi and Birsa. [xlvii] The Chotanagpur Improvement Society formed in 1916 by the Anglican Bishop of Ranchi represented a reformist tribal middle class. In 1918 it began propagating tribal identity, and re-named itself the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj in 1920. In 1938, the Samaj helped form the Adibasi Mahasabha. The question of an *Adivasi* identity had become a live issue among the tribal workers of Chota Nagpur by the mid 1930's. As the issue became mixed up with the ambitions of the Bengali and Oriya politicians the debates became ugly. In November 1938 the provincial Congress mouthpiece *Searchlight* denounced 'the enemies of Bihar who have been conspiring against her territorial integrity by promoting the utterly spurious agitation for the separation of Chota Nagpur'. [xlviii] Jimutbahan Sen, Bihar's disaffected Bengali Congressman, criticised the "unsympathetic attitude of the Congress Government towards the aborigines", and the habit (among a section of the nationalist intelligentsia) of abusing missionaries and 'Christian aboriginals'. [xlix]

Maneck Homi began raising the 'aborigine' question in the second phase of his career,

after his release from jail in late 1935. He was adapting to the constitutional developments of 1935, and the growing ethnic awareness of the tribal population. One such occasion was a lightning strike in 1937 by coolies and *rezas*, over discriminatory bonus in the Indian Steel and Wire Products Company (ISWP) owned by Sardar Bahadur Indra Singh,[1] who employed some German covenanted staff. The *rezas* were especially militant in this strike, during which the owner employed Sikhs and other Punjabis to crush it. On August 9 the union presented a list of demands which concerned increments, piece rates, dismissals and bonus. The *rezas* demanded maternity benefits and a rest-room for women. The second grievance on the list was that "*no chance of promotion is given to aboriginals, preference being given to Oriyas, Babus, and Punjabis*" (emphasis mine). [li]

The strike ended in a stalemate, with Abdul Bari (who had just made his advent in Jamshedpur), helping to defuse the situation in favour of the management. The owner had Congress links and Bari and the regional Congress were keen to erode Homi's influence. Thereafter Homi lost ground and branches of his new union, the JLF-1936 began performing a conciliatory function in the region's labour movement.

The *Adivasis* now entered (passively, thus far) his campaign to resist the Bari-Congress hegemony over Jamshedpur labour.[lii] That ethnic grievance in Chota Nagpur's labour movement was already politically charged became evident on May 18, when Rajendra Prasad raised the matter of alleged discrimination against 'aboriginals' in promotions at TISCO.[liii]

Meanwhile Jaipal Singh, a Christian *Munda* from Ranchi, who had offered his 'services' to the Bihar ministry in 1938 was nursing his wounded pride after being rebuffed. Three days before the Second Adibasi Mahasabha (January 19-21, 1939), [liv] he informed Rajendra Prasad that he had "now been recognised as the natural leader of the Adibasis", and was eager to make his people work within the Congress. In February, he complained about the treatment he had received. [lv] In May he raised the question of self-determination and criticised the "indirect employment of labour", expressing the hope that the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee would "materially offer greater protection to the unskilled workers" of the industrial areas. [lvi] 'Self-determination'

was an ideological reflex of the social disruption caused by industrialisation. Jaipal Singh's intervention in labour disputes was part of a political struggle against the hegemonic posture of Abdul Bari, the Bihar Congress' strongest representative in Jamshedpur, but it was grounded in the sense of deprivation felt by the tribals. His strategy was to demonstrate his popularity amongst tribal workers by appealing to them to abstain from participation in labour disputes. In his tours of the area in mid-1939, he advised the *Adivasis* to avoid union activity and called for the formation of a separate union. [lvii]

When a strike broke out in the Tatanagar Foundry owned by Jagannath Agarwala and N.N. Rakshit, it was against a backdrop of a shift in the leadership the previous year from Homi's union to that of Bari, and a concerted effort by management to change the ethnic composition of their workforce. By this time there were 2528 workers in the Foundry - 1736 *Adivasis*, 530 Oriyas and 262 'others'; a 31% increase in the first two categories since 1938. Nearly 90% were from Bihar and Orissa as compared to 74% previously. (Although figures for the female component of the workforce in this new phase are not available, we may safely assume that this was comparable to the 35 to 40 percent norm in similar labour-intensive occupations).

On 29 August 1939 two union activists were suspended for negligence, and two others for attempting to organise a lightning strike. 66 men of the Furnace department were dismissed for striking on the 30th. [lviii] Union Vice-President J.N. Mitra complained of "unprecedented repression" and management's attempts to sow "dissension and division". Meanwhile Nilkantha Das, President of the Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee and "a close friend of the Management" addressed Oriya workers and asked them to work loyally, and the Oriya leaders Jadumoni Mangoraj and P.K. Mohanty started the Tatanagar Foundry Oriya Association. Jaipal Singh also made an appearance as a guest of the Company. [lix] So did Maneck Homi. In the events that followed, the management and its friends successfully won over the Adivasi component of the workforce ñ which in any case was numerically dominant, but the process engendered much bitterness. Bari's union activists manning the pickets gave vent to their feelings in choice abuse hurled at the women workers, thus motivating the latter to break the strike

with defiance. On the 9 October a thousand *Adivasi* workers led by Homi and his lieutenant Mangal Singh confronted five hundred men led by Bari in a culmination of years of hostility. Police mediation defused the tension and nearly nine hundred workers, a large number of them women, entered the plant. A hundred Oriya workers, who had so far remained aloof also decided to enter the factory.[lx] That the question of tribal cum gender identity was predominant in the minds of these 'strike-breakers' was underlined two days later, when Oriya and *Adivasi* workers complained about the abuse of women by "Punjabis of other companies", and warned of exercising their right to self-defence.[lxi]

It is noteworthy that violence and intimidation, much of it directed against the *rezas*, and some of it very likely animated by hostility towards low-caste employees, had characterized the behaviour of the strikers from the very outset of the crisis. Four sweepers had written to the management on September 21 complaining about threats and obstruction. In late October groups of *rezas* had been assaulted - which prompted a written submission to the administration by hundreds of loyal workers. [lxii] The visible divisions among the employees permitted the Works Manager to claim that the troubles had been instigated and "no real labour issues (were) at stake." He also used a communal motif to undermine Bari. [lxiii]

On October 29-30, seven Congress provincial ministries resigned and the political situation changed dramatically. By November 4, there were 1400 persons at work of whom a thousand were *Adivasis*. [lxiv] The events described demonstrate once more that the politics of labour was not a simple matter of class unity. They also show that the issues which concerned working people stretched from the economics of daily life to sentiments related to ethnicity and gender. It was, after all, their status as workers that converted 'aboriginals' into 'Adivasi workers'. This too, was a political gesture on their part, and not merely a product of the ambitions of politicians establishing themselves on the ground of identity.

Resistance to Goondaism

Physical intimidation, so important a means of maintaining the subordinate position of workers at the shop floor, was a commonplace experience for workers of Chota Nagpur at all levels. During the period under survey, violence in industrial relations was so endemic that Mahatma Gandhi was constrained to remark upon it in one of his rare visits to the area. The culprits were the notorious *goondas* and *dalals* (management agents). Such treatment was part and parcel of managerial strategy in the metallurgical industries and the coalfields of Chota Nagpur. Very often the men who performed these tasks were workers - in this case, however, they were inevitably working under instructions from certain management executives or union leaders sympathetic to management. There are several examples of this phenomenon. In the case of TISCO, one W.V.R. Naidu came to be known as the 'jackal of the Company', and commanded a group of musclemen who regularly broke up workers' meetings in the 1930's. This group acquired the appellation 'Anti-Party'. One of the most glaring instances of their modus-operandi was the breaking up of Subhas Bose's meeting in Jamshedpur on 20 September 1931, when (as historical evidence has revealed) [lxv], the TISCO management tried to crush union activity one and for all by means of physical punishment. Thirty-seven persons were injured in the fracas, in which lathies and stones were freely used. The administration's own assessment (and at this time the English officials were favourably inclined towards the Tatas), confirmed the reports of eye-witnesses that well-known goons in TISCO's employ were the ones responsible for the riot:

I have just now heard from Davies (the Sub Divisional Officer-DS). He is of opinion that the breakup of the meeting probably was arranged by or with the consent of the Company. This has of course been the policy of SC Gupta, Tata's Land Officer and others for a long time. [lxvi]

What is noteworthy is that despite all the official obfuscation, workers got the management's message loud and clear - they were convinced that these attempts were intended to silence them. This event is notable for fierce resistance on the part of union members. One of them (the JLA activist Moni Ghosh) reported

When the workers took their seats, the hooligans lathies became active mercilessly... Subhas Babu stood firm... workers... started retaliating (and) the fight went on for an hour. This was perhaps the first time that the Steel Company's hirelings were injured in their attempt to break labour meetings. This gang had driven out Homi from his meetings... they had made the Federation powerless, humiliated Mangal Singh... but the table was now turned...[lxvii]

The disruptive activities of the so-called 'anti-party' were also much in evidence during the period of the Depression, when workers were desperately trying to keep afloat some kind of solidarity actions. They also reacted violently to the immensely popular meetings of the newly released Maneck Homi in 1935. These men were associated with the Metal Workers' Union led by the B.N. Railway union leader V.V. Giri. The M.W.U. was designed to fulfil Giri's aspirations to leadership of Jamshedpur's workers. Its achievements as a union were as intangible as its muscle power was substantial. (Its illustrious mentor made no mention of it in his memoir).

It is thus apparent that a gradated structure of control lubricated by violence was essential to the working of colonial capitalism, but it is equally true that its systematic use aroused great indignation among the working class. There are examples of such resistance right through the period of the Depression, when physical intimidation was the preferred means adopted by TISCO management to deal with attempts at mobilisation against reductions. Repeated attacks on workers meetings in 1935 led to a mass turnout in the 1937 elections, when Homi's candidate for the labour constituency, Natha Ram defeated W.V.R. Naidu, 'put up by the Company', and Michael John of the JLA by a decisive margin. This was a clear manifestation of the workers' animus towards intimidation. [lxviii]

Similarly, in the late 1930's, when Tatanagar was beset by management-inspired violence and hooliganism, we find workers active in their resistance. One instance of this took place in the Wire Products factory owned by Sardar Indra Singh, father of India's first Defense Minister. During the course of a strike led by the Congress Socialists, a

communist cadre named Hazara Singh was run over by a truck carrying blacklegs and succumbed to his injuries. [lxix] an eyewitness, Sadhuram Sharma, alleged that the injuries were deliberately inflicted. When the lorry approached the gate, he said, Hazara Singh remonstrated with a police officer for helping the Company transport blacklegs:

"Then Comrade Hazara Singh and a Wire Company worker, Comrade Piara Singh lay down on the road. The lorry reached that point and stopped... There were many picketting workers... The vehicle was stationary for five minutes. The Managing Director... Sardar Baldev Singh, who later became Defence Minister, was standing in the verandah of the general office... he gestured with his finger, that the lorry be started, but the driver... refused, because two men, were lying in front of it... Then Amar Singh took over the steering and, in the presence of the police, drove the lorry over the two, crushing them as he moved into the factory gate, leaving them severely wounded. The picketters were greatly excited, and the workers inside the lorry related the incident upon entering the factory... Within half an hour all the workers inside broke down the gates and came out, and there was a terrific commotion on all sides... ([lxx])."

The eyewitness was strongly influenced by Hazara Singh's death, prior to which, he said, he had disapproved of strikes. After these events he thought to himself, *Yeh to admi ko maar bhi dete hain (they even kill people)*, and became a communist. Estimates of the participants in Hazara's funeral procession ranged from 2000 ([lxxi]), to several thousand, reported by Sadhuram. The incident had a deep effect upon contemporary life, said Sadhuram, and it came to be said that every drop of Hazara's blood produced communists. Many young workers like himself were attracted to communism - such was the degree of bitterness engendered by Hazara's death that the proprietor was obliged to shut down the factory after a prolonged strike.

Contrary to the idea that workers were ignorant of or indifferent to crucial contemporary issues, I would like to stress the opposite, viz., that they were profoundly aware of nationalism, identity and gender, not to speak of the violence and communal strife around them. It is significant that they interpreted nationalism through the prism of their democratic aspirations, and an antipathy to racial arrogance; and that far from

pitting identity against class, they rather mobilised traditional identity for constructing class solidarity. They could resist violent intimidation on the spot but as a whole, they fought it through prolonged unionisation and participation in democratic processes. They were capable of inviting certain persons to lead them, and equally capable of throwing them overboard when it transpired that something less than transparent was going on. And it is noteworthy that they were resistant to communalism throughout - a Parsi, a Muslim, a Sikh (and in later years, a Christian - Michael John) were all in turn lionised by the workers of Jharkhand as leaders and as role models. Clearly, the history of class struggle in this area obliges us to rethink certain stereotypical positions about the working class and modern political processes.

Notes

[i] By a dialectical advance, subjective self-seeking turns into mediation of the particular through the universal, with the result that each man in earning, producing and enjoying on his own account is eo ipso producing and earnings for the enjoyment of everyone else. The compulsion which brings this about is rooted in the complex interdependence of each on all, and it now presents itself to each as the universal permanent capital'. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, cited by Istvan Meszaros, in *Beyond Capital*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1995; p. 12.

[ii] Dilip Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Trade Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928-1939*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi 1995. In the following pages, RCL refers to the Royal Commission on Labour; BLEC to the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee; TFL to the Tata Files on Labour (per kind courtesy of Professor Blair Kling), TSA to the Tata Steel Archives, Jamshedpur, and RPP to the Rajendra Prasad Papers at the National Archives

[iii] Verrier Elwin, *The Story of Tata Steel*, p. 78; and Satya Brata Datta, *Capital Accumulation and Workers' Struggle in Indian Industrialisation : The Case of Tata Iron and Steel Company 1910-1970*, Stockholm, 1986, pp. 10, 19.

[iv] S.K. Sen, *The House of Tata*, Calcutta 1975, p. 95.

[v] File 5/VIII/1929 (this and other File references are from the Special Political section, Bihar State Archives, Patna). Part 1, Narrative, paragraph 33. Unless otherwise specified, hereafter all file references are from this source. Also, RCL, vol 4 part 1, p. 72.

[vi] BLEC. vol 3-B, Books 1 and 2.

[vii] The District Gazetteer for Singhbhum (1913), reported 5672 as the population of Sakchi village in 1911. The other figures are from the censuses.